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2nd Place Essay - ENGL 1000 Literacy Autobiography Contest 2020: No, You're Not

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Ryan Santoro

Laura White

Ryan Santoro Literacy Narrative

My literacy narrative is about my diagnosis with Asperger's syndrome which is a form of autism. I struggled with managing the symptoms of my autism when I was much younger but over time, I was able to overcome these issues. I designed this narrative using the rhetorical strategy of chronological order to explain my story, starting at the early stages of my life and concluding in present day. Having to recollect all the most vivid and traumatic moments in my life made this paper a bit challenging for me, since I had to compose a numerous amount of memories from my childhood into a paper deemed acceptable for the literacy narrative contest. There was a fair number of rewrites on this paper because I didn't know how I was going to format it and which memories of my life I was going to include. My first draft didn't really showcase the effect that literacy had on me, however by the time my paper was revised I had done a full analysis of the major events in my life and how they are correlated to literacy.

No, You're Not

I have something to reveal to all of you. This might be a shock to some of you, but I was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome which is a form of autism. I want you all to understand who I really am and know what the struggles were in my life back then and how literacy played a big role as to why I was able to overcome the major issues of my condition. I hope after I'm done sharing my life story that you all will still be able to view me the same way.

The phrase "No you're not" is the usual response I get from people when I tell them I'm autistic. I would love to tell them that they're right and I'm busting their chops, but I can't do that since what I'm saying is true.

Before I turned 4, I didn't speak. My parents sent me to a special therapist who worked with me every day trying to get me to utter words on my own. My late development to language was my first experience with undergoing change since learning how to use words to communicate with others is considered an aspect to literacy. My mother told me how happy she was when the therapist got me to say the word Rock. However, me just now learning how to talk would be the reason why my autism became more noticeable. When I turned 7, the symptoms were obvious. I lacked social skills, I became very obsessive to things, I dealt with anger issues, etc. That was when the doctors finally diagnosed me with Asperger's and from there on I was labelled the autistic child with a lot of work to do.

The symptom I had the most concern about was my lack of social skills. I was already placed in speech therapy and social therapy before the diagnosis. These were my first steps to changing who I was. I had just entered elementary school and what I didn't realize was that this would be where my conflict with bullies begins. Since I didn't have social skills, I always got picked on by the other kids after I'd say something weird or stupid. I did make friends, but it was

all the other kids who got bullied as well. The interesting thing about my friends is that they were all on the spectrum as well. I naturally gravitated towards other kids who sat in the same boat as me and I didn't even realize that. Though, it was nice to know that I had people that understood me and had my back when I needed them most. Still...the bullying didn't stop, and it only got worse from there after I moved to middle school. If there is one place, I never want to step foot in again, it's that damn middle school. Not only was I being tormented by my own grade, but the grade above me decided to join in on the fun as well. This lasted all four years of middle school. It got to a point that I didn't even want to go to school anymore because I was afraid of being bullied again. I would cry myself to sleep wondering, what is wrong with me? Why can't I just be normal? Why am I even alive if this happens to me? I contemplated suicide so many times I can't even count. I was in so much pain I wanted to end it all so badly.

Then something amazing happened to me one day in the 7th grade. My mother told me I was autistic. It came as a shock to me and I told my mom "No I'm not." But she explained everything to me and afterwards I asked, "Why didn't you tell me?" and she said, "I did, many times Ryan." Apparently, she did because whenever she had to sign me up for sports, she would list Asperger's on the physical. What I find weird is that she wrote it under FOOD ALLERGIES. I remember telling her, "Mom, I'm not allergic to asparagus I eat it all the time." So, I guess I knew, I just wasn't paying enough attention to it, but I digress. The news of being autistic changed my outlook towards myself completely. I had become completely self-aware of my condition. With the understanding that I wasn't happy with myself, I made the conscious decision to fully invest myself into recreating my image.

I knew that I didn't like the person I was, but I liked everyone else. So, with that in mind, I decided to engulf myself within the practice of imitation where if I admired a particular thing

someone does then I would try to implement that into my life. This practice can be considered as a sort of social literacy, and in my opinion was the most urgent aspect to literacy that I needed to learn in order to improve myself. Some examples of imitating would be how someone does their hair or phrases someone might use. Now I'm sure everyone does this themselves where they might copy a phrase someone else used, but I took it to another level and began copying how people walk around school, how people laugh, the tones that a person might use. This was working well for me during the last two years of middle school. The amount of bullying I endured went down immensely and I had begun to practice social skills with my peers. The problem with this was that I would also copy the actions of the bullies too which caused me to become a bully myself. I had to be reminded of it by one of my friends when they told me, "You've become a real asshole, you know that?" This is when I had begun to improve my moral and ethical literacy because after that moment with my friends, I was completely focused on using my slowly developing social skills to be kind to people as well. I continued with my pursuit on changing.

Now I'm at the very end of my eighth-grade year and this is when my speech and social therapists told me that I no longer needed the therapy since I had progressed so much. It was a big moment for me, though I had to remind myself that I was nowhere near perfect and I must keep moving forward because now I'm attending my first year of high school. Although I had to deal with the negative effects of autism in high school, for the first time I found something that embraces the positive sides to being autistic...chess.

Chess is a game that is meant to challenge a person's mental ability. Now, my parents would always tell me how they saw me as a kid who knew how to think things through. They could see this in my math abilities because I never did work on paper, it was all in my head. It's a no brainer that I would fall in love with chess and go crazy with it. I joined our high school's chess

team my freshman year and I could not stop playing. I played constantly every day. You'd think I'd be really good, but I was horrible in my first two years. Even though I had an enhanced thought process, it took me a couple years before I learned how to apply how I think to the board. I'm not sure if this is correlated to literacy, but I do know that being able to showcase the abilities of my brain to the board also allowed me to apply logical reasoning to my daily life. I was able to be more efficient with tasks at home, at school. But most importantly, I became more efficient with speaking to people too.

After two years, this new "me" came to fruition and my skills of the game rose quickly making me the best player on the team. I say this now, being the number one player is a big reason why I changed, and here's why. When it comes to be the best player you have responsibilities to that name as well. First, you become a mentor to a lot of people who want to get better at chess. And second, when you go to compete against other teams, you represent your team which means you can't act a fool. I believe that because of these new responsibilities, not only did I mature as a person but also my words too. I was able to speak fluently and logically to people without having to feel like a dunce every time. I felt like I could speak to someone and be totally incorrect afterwards yet not feel the embarrassment for saying the wrong things.

In present day, it is no longer noticeable that I have autism. Some of the major symptoms that I displayed are no longer visible. I eliminated the weaknesses of Asperger's syndrome and what remains are the benefits and advantages for being on the spectrum. The phrase "No you're not" has so much meaning behind it. All the years of pain, embarrassment, anger. All the times I felt like I wanted to give up but chose to keep pushing just a little bit longer. All the sleepless nights wondering if I'll ever make it out of this. All of that is compacted into that tiny, simple phrase. Sometimes it can be challenging to tell someone of my condition. I don't see autism as

something that holds me back anymore and I don't want it to remain as a label. But I also want people to know my story and who I really am. I want people to feel inspired by my journey with the help of literacy. Literacy has a place in my heart since it helped a kid go from learning how to speak, to being a person who others would see as any other normal human. Now what better way for people to know my life story than to write about it. Writing my story so that others may read into it has been something I've always wanted to do. After everything I've been through, I want to give back to those who need help and guidance with the issues in their life and maybe my story will give them a reason to keep going and not allow the phrases and the labels to define who they are.